

# The case against national school standards: Obama's push would homogenize education even further

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[President Obama](#) recently announced a \$4.35 billion "Race to the Top" fund that he and [Education Secretary Arne Duncan](#) will use, among other things, to "reward states that come together and adopt a common set of standards and assessments." Duncan has championed uniform national standards as a key to educational improvement since taking office. "If we accomplish one thing in the coming years," he said back in February, "it should be to eliminate the extreme variation in standards across [America](#)."

That goal now seems within reach.

Both the [National Governors Association](#) and the [Council of Chief State School Officers](#) recently stepped forward to lead the charge, and 46 states are already behind them. The day may soon come when every student in the country is expected to master the same material at the same age.

Let's hope that day never comes.

The quest to homogenize standards and testing has always rested on a misunderstanding. According to Duncan, "standards shouldn't change once you cross the [Mississippi River](#) or the [Rocky Mountains](#)," because the kids "are no different from each other." In one sense, he's right. There's little reason to believe that [New York](#) children are intrinsically smarter or slower than those of [Colorado](#), on average.

But averages don't take tests. Kids do. Even if students' average academic potential were the same in [Texas](#) and [Vermont](#), the individual children who make up those averages would still be all over the map. To claim that all the children in a single large family could progress through every subject at the same pace is a stretch. To claim this of every child in a whole neighborhood is preposterous. To claim it of every child in a nation of 300 million people is the premise of national standards.

Children are not interchangeable widgets. It does not serve their interests to feed them through learning factories on a single, fixed-pace conveyor belt. Some pick up reading quickly and easily fly through ever more challenging texts. Others find reading a chore, progressing more slowly even when encouraged by supportive families and talented teachers. To demand a single pace for all students in all subjects is to simultaneously tie together the laces of the fleet and kick out the crutches of the slow.

Not only is it impossible to create a single set of standards that would serve every child equally well, such standards would fail to significantly improve our schools. High external standards have never been the driving force behind human progress.

The tremendous leap in Olympic athletic achievement of the past 40 years was not achieved because the organizing committee told competitors to start swimming faster or jumping higher. It happened because Olympic athletes are competitors.

The same thing is true across every sector of our economy. Cell phone makers have not relentlessly improved their products because of national mandates. They've done it to attract customers away from their competitors. [Amazon](#) did not diversify its business and create the [Kindle](#) because a consortium of Internet vendors demanded it, but because Amazon sought to beat its competition.

The progress we've seen in one industry after another, just as in athletic pursuits, has been the result of competition - something that our education system has sorely lacked. At the dawn of the 21st century, three quarters of American children are still assigned to schools based on where they live, by bureaucrats who have never met them. Stellar public schools cannot grow and take over less successful ones. Ineffective public schools have little fear of losing students to competitors because they have no real competitors - they enjoy a monopoly on \$12,000 per pupil in public spending.

I published a paper in the Journal of School Choice collecting every scientific study I could find comparing public and private school outcomes. These scores of findings span the globe and cover everything from academic achievement and cost-effectiveness to parental satisfaction. And they favor competitive market school systems over state-run monopolies by a margin of 15 to 1.

If our goal is to help all children maximize their potential, we won't achieve it by shackling them together with their age-mates and forcing them to march in lockstep through the curriculum.

Instead, we must emancipate them from the confines of rigid age-based grading, allow and encourage them to progress as quickly as they are able, and oblige schools to compete for the privilege of serving them.

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